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## Russian Digital Lifestyle Media and the Construction of Global Selves

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Lexington Books

2016-03

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Ratilainen , S M 2016 , Russian Digital Lifestyle Media and the Construction of Global Selves . in M Suslov & M Bassin (eds) , Eurasia 2.0 : Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media . Russian, Eurasian, and Eastern European Politics , Lexington Books .

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Published in *Eurasia 2.0: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media*. Edited by Mikhail Suslov and Mark Bassin. Lanham: Lexington Books. 3–23.

## **Chapter 1. Russian Digital Lifestyle Media and the Construction of Global Selves**

**Saara Ratilainen**

Internet has replaced the compass and map for the world traveller, instead s/he follows the Wi-Fi signal until he has navigated his way to the destination.<sup>1</sup> In his blog, the Russian travel guide writer Valeri Shanin describes how during his stay on a remote island Labuan, the Internet signal with the name “Backbackers” provides him with information not detectable with his eyes. It leads him to an “unnoticeable door” of a “hostel for international travellers (...). And, indeed, you could find Internet here as well” (*Mir bez viz*, Federal’naia territoriiia Labuan). The hostel, is also the important space of shared double-beds and stories that now travel to the outside world through the shared wireless connection. The guest house is a heterotopian “place outside of all places” (Foucault 1967/1984, 2) that neutralises cultural barriers and acts to be home for those who want to be away from home. For the blogger Anton Krotov, another Russian advocate of independent travel, international guest houses and internet cafes represent the evils of commerce touching even the remotest of locations, bringing them into part of the global monoculture of tourism. Whilst the two Russian travellers appear to have differing opinions regarding tourism-related services, their motivations for travelling are almost identical. Shanin travels the world in order to gain the “maximum multitude of impressions” (*Mir bez viz* 2014) while Krotov asserts that although the entire world has already been “photographed, published in glossy magazines, and

uploaded to the Internet, people still want to witness the diversity of the world with their own eyes” (avp.travel.ru).

Both Shanin and Krotov share travel tips and stories through their blogs and travellers’ community sites with a wide online audience. Through these forums, anyone can also join them on their travels. This means that they do not only add to the existing body of travel representations but rather create an interactive window to the world of travel. The position of an experienced world traveller and travel blogger also provides them with a geographically and geopolitically active gaze from which they examine and map the possibilities of a Russian citizen for individual global mobility, and which acquires meaning in the interaction between the Russian speaking online audience, the global community of travellers, and different techniques of digital communication.

In this chapter, I analyse Russian travel blogs focusing upon the online representations of the contemporary traveller’s identity as digitally organised “global Self.” I ask, how the popular genre of travel blogs shapes and determines global identities and how popular geopolitical imaginations about individual mobility are created and maintained on the Runet. I argue that one of the main devices for this is the geopolitically active traveller’s gaze that is produced in individualised digital communication environments, such as the blogosphere and on social networking sites. The individualisation of content production and perception characterises the internet as a communicative space in general as, for example, Lev Manovich (2001, 269) following the ideas of Walter Benjamin, defined the “navigable” space of the internet as a “subjective space” – “its architecture responding to the subject’s movement and emotion.” I maintain that travel blogs negotiate with and reflect on the dominant ideas of migration and globalisation, thus participating in the formation of the popular geopolitical understanding of the globally mobile Self.

I draw this conception from John Urry's ideas about the "tourist gaze" (Urry 2001). According to Urry, the tourist gaze is "The gaze directed to features of landscape or townscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary" (2002, 3). Urry argues that through the diversification of societal structures and the mass media in modern societies, the tourist gaze has become an essential way of seeing the world in general. The types of changes, such as the development of consumer society, and changes in mass communication, by the increasing emphasis on entertainment in the mass media, have, according to Urry, universalised the tendency to picture the world with fresh eyes. Furthermore, digital communication technologies diversify and intensify the possibilities for this type of virtual tourism and engagement with the world through the tourist gaze. Moreover, as Vera Rukomoinikova argues, the increased online access to video and audio material on various types of tourist projects have made travel easily manageable for internet users as she notes, "the former orientation to geography with the help of compass and different land marks is now replaced by the new media" (2013, 135–36).

Urry's theory responds to Daniel J. Boorstin's (1962) famous idea of the opposite cultural types of the traveller and tourist based on the distinction between high and low cultures. The nostalgic image of the traveller represents high culture's "authentic" and spiritually uplifting practice of interacting with the world, whereas the tourist attaches to mass culture thereby representing the standardising powers of consumption and the entertainment industry. This dichotomy has been discussed and challenged by many later scholars (see, for example Urry 20002; MacCannell 1989; Gorsuch & Koenker 2006; Bauman 2011), however, it persists in the popular discourse in general and in travel blogs in particular. Therefore, the key question here does not only concern the independent traveller's

attitudes to global tourism but also the digital media's capability to transfer authentic experiences into representations of independent travel in the age of mass consumption.

My research materials comprise of Russian travel blogs and other related online resources such as videos produced and/or starred by the bloggers available on YouTube, and the bloggers' newsfeeds on social networking sites, such as on Facebook and Instagram. Whilst the blogs serve as the core material of my analysis, it would be unwise to not take these other channels of online communication into consideration, as publishing content on the Internet is a constantly evolving field of communication possessing the special feature of multi-modal, multi-channeled, and interactive communication between people, and publishing platforms. Runet hosts a lively community of travel bloggers and travellers' community sites such as [travelbloggers.ru](http://travelbloggers.ru) and [storyfinder.ru](http://storyfinder.ru), which maintain ranking lists of the most read Russian travel blogs and the most talked about destinations, as well as updates of the newest blog posts, interactive maps, and search engines through which specific information about a country or a blog can be found. [Travelbloggers.ru](http://Travelbloggers.ru), for instance, lists 134 blogs whereas [storyfinder.ru](http://storyfinder.ru) has a searchable database of 225 blogs (as of June 2015). These sites overlap with traditional lifestyle media as several blogs consisting primarily of travel reports are also hosted by the websites of popular glossy magazines, such as, *Vokrug Sveta* [Around the World] and the Russian editions of the *National Geographic*, and *Yoga Journal*. Therefore, I read my research materials in the broad framework of lifestyle media, which support the worldwide multi-billion industry specialising in services for entertaining and improving one's self and everyday life (see, for example, Noppakari & Hautakangas 2012; Raisborough 2011, 3–5; Zvereva 2010, 271).<sup>2</sup> However, as Angela McRobbie (2004) observes in the case of British television makeover shows, the lifestyle media are grounded in strong class and gender dynamics, which ultimately makes the public representation of personal transformations political (see also Heyes 2007; Jones 2008). Travellers' personal

blogs and community sites present alternative ways of participating in the global flow of tourism, whilst simultaneously committing to the general agenda of lifestyle media by promoting travel as a tool for identity building and even as a site of personal transformation.

For closer analysis I have selected three popular travel blogs who represent different trends of online lifestyle media: Currently the most followed Russian travel blog by Maria Dubrovskaja who publishes on her website *traveliving.org* (2007–present),<sup>3</sup> the popular blogger Artemy Lebedev's travelogue on his website *tema.ru* (2001–present),<sup>4</sup> and the blog *Mir bez viz* [A world without visas] by Valerii Shanin published on the Internet site of *Vokrug sveta* (2011–2013).<sup>5</sup> All these blogs are based on the idea of travelling the world i.e., travel destinations are not restricted to any specific country, area or continent. On the contrary, they all strive to travel as extensively as possible. Travelling the world, however, means different things for each blogger both geographically and conceptually. Maria Dubrovskaja who was originally from the Northern Siberian republic Yakutia, mainly travels in the countries of Far-East Asia. Shanin and Lebedev are Moscow-based world travellers systematically aiming to travel around the world and to visit every country in the world although for Shanin this means only the countries a Russian citizen can access without a visa. As the result, Shanin's visa-free world tour comprises 38 countries mainly located in East Europe, Middle East, South America and in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>6</sup> By conducting a close analysis of the different ways in which these Russian world travellers use online communication to represent global mobility and to construct the identity of a "digi-traveller," this chapter contributes to the study of the Russian new media from the viewpoint of the geopolitics of Self.

Popular geopolitics, distinctive from practical and formal geopolitics, as Tuthail & Dalby (2002, 5) define, is found within the artefacts of transnational popular culture, whether they be mass-market magazines, novels or movies (see also Dittmer & Dodds 2008, 441). Tourist guide books, travel magazines, and also travel blogs fall into this category of transnational popular culture as they offer their readers popular models of how to build a relationship with foreign countries as part of everyday life and leisure. These models are closely connected to the dominant ideologies and trends in society. The popular understanding of travel and tourism has drastically changed in Russia over time. For example, in the wake of the emergence of the European tourism industry in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pre-revolutionary Russian critical discourse addressed leisure travel as frivolous and as a non-productive waste of time (Dolzhenko & Savenkova 2011). Later, the Soviet ideologists intentionally attached the meanings of education and socially productive activity to the concept of tourism in order to make a distinction between the Soviet and the assumed Western and bourgeois ways of recreation. Simultaneously, in the Soviet everyday discourse the notion of leisure travel (*otdykh*) held a number of different meanings, from visits to well-known health resorts or hiking or to travel in order to have sex with strangers (Gorsuch 2006).

The state made tourism available for the Soviet masses but the industry was centralised and tourist flows were directed to domestic resorts. Ideologically, tourism was employed as an important tool for making and perfecting the “New Soviet Man” through an “individual’s encounter with new territories and experiences” (Gorsuch & Koenker 2011, 2). Soviet modernity was to a great extent created through “spatial imaginations” including representations of an individual citizen’s mobility across the vast homeland, which “offered a multiethnic and multicultural space for Soviet tourists” (Turoma 2013, 240). Furthermore, international travel functioned as a means for social distinction as it was available only to the

political and cultural elite, although tourism to the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union's other allies increased during the 1960s (Gorsuch 2006).

Russia and Russians have now become part of the global market of mass tourism, which is the largest industry in the world (Leheny 1995, 367).<sup>7</sup> The Russian tourism market exploded in the 1990s which required institutional, economic, and cultural traditions of travel and tourism to be renegotiated (see, e.g., Stepchenkova & Morrison 2006; Burns 1998). Travel abroad by post-Soviet Russians has, however, been predominantly studied in the context of the post-Soviet consumer revolution, and from the viewpoint of the economies receiving large amounts of Russian tourists such as Finland, Poland, and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the focus has been on explaining the phenomena typical of the 1990s and the early 2000s Russia, such as shuttle trade and shopping tourism, and stressing the role of individual Russians in taking part in the international flows of consumer goods and currency (Gurova & Ratilainen 2015; Bar-Kolelis & Wiskulski 2012; Mukhina 2009; Pitkänen & Vepsäläinen 2008; Yükseker 2007).

This research has shown that Russian tourists have a great economic, social, and cultural impact *vis-à-vis* the most popular countries of their destination. However, neither digital media's role in creating and maintaining the idea of travel as a lifestyle choice, nor the self-perception of Russian travellers have been adequately discussed. Moreover, while the statistics show that 57 per cent of Russians have never travelled abroad (Levada Center 2014), new media creates novel tools for making popular geopolitical interpretations based upon virtual travel. In other words, experiencing and imagining exotic places and tourist attractions from the comfort of one's own home via the internet makes the link between the globalising effects of travel and mass media even stronger.



## Global Consumer Market vs. Globally Mobile Self

Lifestyle media are often characterised by a high level of consumer loyalty. On the other hand, they are not regarded as belonging to the category of serious media but rather to the sphere of popular culture. Therefore the influence of the lifestyle media on people's everyday-level understanding of political, social, and economic issues is often left out from public discussions. However, lifestyle media do create important tools for identity building and for maintaining the feelings of community and belonging (see Hermes 2005). Joke Hermes (2005, 10) discusses this dynamics through the concept of *cultural citizenship*, which she defines "as the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is, text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticising offered in the realm of [popular] culture." She continues, "[popular culture] provides, within limits, an alternative sense of community, one not provided by social institutions such as political parties, trade unions, sports clubs, or the family" (ibid., 10–11). The internet as a communicative space has similar symbolic and practical functions as many traditional forms of popular and lifestyle media have had. The internet facilitates access not only to the consumer market but also to the community of consumers by introducing different consumer choices as an essential part of the overall information flow, and by offering technological tools for making purchases and discussing them with others in the privacy of one's home. This type of consumption is not restricted to one's own local marketplace, as Vlad Strukov explains, "The possibility of purchasing the item online enables the consumer to enjoy instantly an interactivity that defies geographical remoteness" (Strukov 2012, 146–147).

Both actual and symbolic defying of geographical remoteness between the desired consumer item, the global community of consumers and the local consumer market has been important especially when creating middle class values and identities in post-Soviet Russia.

In this framework, lifestyle has also become “one of the societal priorities” (Zvereva 2011, 269). For example, a number of international lifestyle programmes were launched on Russian TV in the early 2000s, which coincides with the consolidation of the post-Soviet middle class as a distinct social group, and the emergence of new consumer culture as one of its main attributes (Zvereva 2011, 269; Gurova 2015, 3). Moreover, as Vera Zvereva insists, formatted lifestyle programmes, “invite viewers to explore the identity of a ‘European’ citizen or a citizen of the global world who follows fashionable trends” (2011, 275). This means that in the post-Soviet context, the idea of transforming one’s Self and everyday life with the help of lifestyle media entails some interesting implications about the place and status of Russians in the globalised world of consumption and popular culture. The popular lifestyle media in Russia thus helps to draw parallels between the post-Socialist individualised space and the global market space.

The term global Self refers to a class sensitive cultural and consumer identity created through lifestyle media and popular culture.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, global Russian could also function as an identity category, which connects closely to a certain type of online communication, and community building that can be exemplified through the study of the online representations of travel and tourism in general, and travel blogs in particular. Firstly, in the same manner as travel, digital communication also suggests a de-territorialized i.e., detached from physical locations and communities, and even publishing platforms, subjectivity (see, Strukov 2011, 165). Secondly, the distinctive feature of the internet (as a medium and a media technology) is to support free distribution of information.<sup>10</sup> Thus, we can argue that the internet as a medium and communication technology, and travelling as a human activity are very closely connected both ideologically and conceptually to the dream of free mobility and escape from set norms and institution. The crossing of geographical borders serve as the underpinning motifs in the travel blogs. Therefore, I assert that the representations of tourism

and travel in the Russian digital media create a specific venue for making popular geopolitical interpretations of the global space as connected to the post-Soviet identity construction.

### Defining Traveller's Identity Online

In addition to a multitude of experiences and impressions, the travel bloggers search for alternative lifestyles abroad which, however, would not fit the traditional definition of migration. This very idea is embedded, for example, in the title of Dubrovskaja's blog *Traveliving*. Furthermore, traveliving as a lifestyle means constantly moving from one place to another without any long-term plans or final destinations. The main purpose of travel is just to move freely and to be spontaneous. Therefore, the people who possess this lifestyle are prepared to adjust their professions and living standards in accordance with the dream of seeing the world and to actualise this dream into their everyday life. Additionally, this means that a blog can provide a venue of professionalisation through which travel itself becomes a source of income. In some cases, the blog has substituted the traveller's former professional field altogether. For instance, before embarking on travelling full-time, Dubrovskaja worked as a state tax official and photographer in St. Petersburg. Selling advertising space in her popular blog now provides her and her partner with a modest but steady income. The blog thus helps to guarantee a long-term perspective for travelling (which is usually thought of as something temporary) and mixes the traditional boundaries between work and leisure, profession and lifestyle.

According to Dubrovskaja, traveliving is also active and independent travelling and therefore implicitly contrasted with organised and/or seasonal tourism. It is defined as a slow and time-consuming movement from one place to another. Dubrovskaja describes the

tranquil and almost meditative mode of this type of travelling in terms of finding and realising one's true wishes. As she explains: "You can sit quietly somewhere on the beach by the ocean, let's say, for example, in Thailand, and do the things you've always wanted to do but for which you didn't have the time". At the same time, as her partner Adzhei Verma explains: "Traveliving is not migration, that is, you don't get settled, which would include getting a job, buying a car, a house, etc. It's not this kind of travelling. It is something out of the ordinary (*eto nechto srednee*). You don't tie yourself to a place; you don't grow roots" (*Traveliving. Zhizn' v puteshestviakh* 2012).

On the one hand, these thoughts reflect the traditional division between the traveller and tourist, on the other, they suggest that a different outlook on life can be acquired as the result of a thorough lifestyle change, i.e. appropriating a position from which one can bond with the world differently while recognising that it is impossible to escape from the tourism industry completely once involved in international travel. Dubrovskaja and Verma's depiction also suggests that it is possible to cast the tourist gaze inwards, i.e., to project a new life situation against the backdrop of travel. Urry explains that mass tourism has become such an inseparable part of many contemporary societies that it is impossible to avoid even by staying in one place. A number of people live in metropolises and other places, which attract large amounts of tourists and therefore they are exposed to the industries responsible for creating and maintaining the tourist gaze in their everyday life.<sup>11</sup> While rejecting the dichotomous way of thinking as obsolete, Urry does differentiate between the *romantic* and *collective* gaze and this distinction follows a similar logic to Boorstin's conceptualisations about the differences between the traveller and tourist as Urry notes: "There is [...] a romantic form of the tourist gaze, in which the emphasis is upon solitude, privacy and personal, semi spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze" (2002, 43). Here the romantic gaze is defined through its private and thus individual character as contrasted to the

collective gaze which is most likely to be employed during a mass sight-seeing tour or a package holiday trip.

This type of romantic relationship between the traveller and his/her destination is strongly present also in the travel blogs, especially in a certain type of representation of the places that aim to show the scenery as if seen for the first time. In such cases, the landscape or a sight is often portrayed as devoid of people and therefore implying an encounter with an unspoilt and/or authentic environment. In addition, this type of representation of a place suggests that the person behind the camera is privileged to view the landscape privately, even though it does not correspond with reality. Another method of producing a representation of the romantic gaze is to embed the viewer in the image as part of a majestic landscape which shows how the traveller becomes one with his/her surroundings, completely immersed in the experience of seeing the world with fresh eyes, as, for instance, in an entry in Dubrovskaja's blog (Oct 12, 2014). The entry introduces a travel report of Turkey and includes a photograph, which is a veritable image of the gaze and is typical of travel blogs (Figure 1). Here, Dubrovskaja is portrayed from behind as gazing in to the historic site of Kayaköy. The privacy of her romantic gaze and her semi spiritual attitude to travelling are implied by the tranquil and all-encompassing mood, which is conveyed to the reader through both the image and the text, as the caption reads, "We stopped and took our time to look at everything" (*Ostanovilis' ne spesha ogliadet' vse*) (Kayaköy, the Ghost Town, 2014).

**INSERT FIGURE 1.1. HERE**

The digital publishing environment creates circumstances for defining travellers also in terms of how virtual they are, i.e., whether the traveller shares his/her photos and stories online in a personal blog or on social networking sites. As noted above, for a number of travellers this type of sharing is mandatory because they are professional travellers and travel

guide writers, which makes the blog just one form of publication in addition to printed travel guides, travel programmes, films, etc. Consequently, it is important to write a blog, which would attract as many readers as possible in order to gain additional publicity for other products and publications. This creates a situation in which bloggers compete against one another over the status of “top-blogger,” and this has an impact on the way the places visited are represented in travel blogs in general.

For example, the travel guide writer and popular blogger Artur Shpiganov explains that today, a professional traveller exists only by sharing his/her experiences online, sometimes even at the expense of missing the truthful scenes and moments as he notes in one of his blog entries: “It is equally important to remind of oneself as to live one’s life. You are not alive unless you write about yourself on social media” (popados.info, Top-blogger). Through this process, the internet becomes one of the most significant reserves of evidence and memories of travel in the modern digital age, as noted by Vera Rukomoinikova (2013, 136) but in the manner dominated by a certain type of marketing logic as described by Shpiganov above. On the other hand, the sheer fact of sharing one’s experiences online can also function as a negative fact about the traveller’s identity. This is the case when the distinction is made between the *virtual* and *authentic* traveller as Dubrovskaja explains in an online interview: “To my mind, the most important travellers are the ones who do not exist on the internet at all. They’re hard to find )) They are busy with real life and they are hugely experienced and they have hundreds of interesting stories to tell.” Furthermore, she characterises herself as not being a traveller with an “upper case T” but as somebody who is “still on the level of a tourist who simply stays for a long time where ever she likes” (livefree5.ru 2013).

The internet, i.e., the blog and continuous posts on social media, can further be understood as the traveller’s social safety net on which he or she can rely in many ways. In

other words, the traveller gains not only economic capital but also social capital on the internet where he or she is found by others. At the same time, to follow Zygmunt Bauman's (2011, 29) ideas of postmodern identity, the strangeness and alienation of the travel experience is tamed and domesticated through the "virtual home" (Strukov 2012, 165) provided by the internet. Consequently, the online *representation* of travel, i.e., sharing the travel experience so as to please the online community's expectations: "Makes the world [...] obedient to the tourist's wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist's desire, made and remade with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse" (Bauman 2011, 29).

Online publication, however, exposes the bloggers' ideas and definitions to instant comments and feedback from the audience. For example, Dubrovskaja and Vezhma's use of the term *traveliving* to describe their lifestyle and attitude to travelling without set destinations is being re-evaluated and redefined in viewers' comments, which are based on a number of contrasting opinions and ideologies. For example, in the comments chain attached to the film *Traveliving. Zhizn' v puteshestviiakh* on YouTube, the user Alex Morozov wonders how this type of lifestyle which "before was vagrancy is now called travelling."

On the other hand, without taking a stand on whether *traveliving* is to be seen as legitimate form of free mobility or just the vagabondism of a couple of social outcasts, the commentator Sergei Dubrovin goes on to define it in terms of rebellion: "It is impossible to beat the system, which really leaves you with only two options: to accept its rules or to choose your own" while another commentator, Georgii Shakhnazarov, confesses to have shed a few "tears of happiness" while thinking that "people can live differently" (YouTube. *Traveliving*. All comments). Thus, the authorial voices of the bloggers become part of a chain of different meanings and ideas on a platform that is based on hypertextuality and on which

the open-ended process of meaning making always leaves room for new definitions of travel and international mobility.

### Appropriating and Re-Appropriating the Globe

Does the representation of the travel experience (an image of a beautiful landscape, or a written description of a new place) in a blog, then, transform a supposedly unique and nonmaterial experience into a reproducible and reified commodity? Urry attaches the gaze into the romanticised view to making social distinctions in the field of tourism and travel culture. In this framework, the view targeted by the tourist's gaze is compared to a positional good, and its value is relational to other views available in the tourism market through its private character (i.e. it is not available to others). The consumption of the positional good separates the subject of consumption from other individuals by the rarity of the good. In other words, as one individual is involved in the consumption of positional goods, the others have to, at the same time, be prevented from consuming the same goods (Urry 2002, 42; see also Featherstone 2007, 86–87). Based upon these ideas, I suggest that the online sharing of the representation of the romantic and privatised tourist gaze is connected to the accumulation of a certain type of capital made possible by digital communication technologies and connected to the values inherent in the ideology of travelling.

Both the traveling lifestyle and the project *Mir bez viz* are very much based on anti-material values. Travel costs are kept to minimum and when staying in destination countries, the travellers seek to live as close to local standards as possible. In this context, the images of moments spent in exquisite places signify the type of capital, which is gained when material well-being in the home country is voluntarily exchanged to the non-material experiences of freedom, crossing geographical and cultural boundaries, and turning one's



dream of constant mobility into an everyday practice. This logic is present in the blogs also when, for example, explaining the exchange of an expensive but must-see tourist attraction to some sort of cheaper variant.

This is, for example, the case when the travellers of the *Mir bez viz* project are considering a cruise while in Egypt. As Shanin writes, this is an important attraction for a world traveller as the cruise on the river Nile from Cairo to Aswan belongs to the group of three most popular touristic routes in the world. The problem just is that the cruise market is mainly taken over by entrepreneurs whose enormous ships look like “swimming hotels” and whose services are overpriced for such budget travellers as Shanin and his friends. Instead of an expensive but obvious option of the liner cruise, they decide to board on a traditional felucca – a small sail boat – for a shorter cruise. In addition to offering Shanin and his friends the possibility of taking part in a global traveller experience, this choice of a primitive boat has some significant added value as the blog describes:

The felucca floats very slowly and ... quietly: one can only hear how the wooden parts of the boat's body make a crunching sound and the wind whistles in the sails [...] Instead, you can relax for real and take it easy. You can follow with your eyes how the sun sinks behind the horizon, how the birds fly above the sea and listen to the shingles rustle (Po Nilu pod parusom 2011).

Shanin's blog further implies that the multitude of these types of subtle and *natural* (as compared to the organised entertainment on a big boat) sensual stimuli can be perceived only as the result of one's frugal consumer choice. Simultaneously, it becomes the authentic option not only in terms of consumption (i.e., choosing a small entrepreneur and local

tradition over organised corporate tourism business) but also on the level of sensual experience.

What makes the representation of this, rather traditional division between backpacking and organised tourism interesting here is the fact that blogs and other constantly expanding digital outlets have created an easy venue for the accumulation and preservation of the added value embedded in different consumer choices during travel. The travellers' mania for taking photographs (characteristic of the digital era in general) can also be understood against this idea – the most precious moment or an imposing view to be captured and then digitised is potentially waiting behind every corner, as, for example, Shanin describes: “Hands are groping for the camera and even though the battery is low and all memory cards full, it feels like the best shot is still ahead” (Na stenakh Dubrovnik). Ultimately, this type of investment of one's time, energy and perceptiveness to the details of the travel experience can be shown to others in a constantly updating image flow on social media. Potentially, the whole world can turn into a possession, visualised through interactive map applications.

Artemy Lebedev represents his own version of the world map on the main page of his travelogue and although different from the ready-made interactive online map applications, it is still to a great extent based on the idea of quantizing the capital embedded in the travel experience through a visual representation (Figure 1.2). The map also visualises his ongoing project and his wish to visit all the countries on the globe. He strives to belong to the group of the few in terms of the number of countries visited by him and this of course makes his travel project more elitist than the other examples analysed in this chapter. Lebedev's blog also represents a different level of professionalisation when it comes to writing a blog; He does not want to support travelling as a lifestyle choice by writing a blog but he uses it to present an approach to the world which is probably more closely connected

to his identity as a professional designer and member of the Russian creative elite – a global Russian.

**INSERT FIGURE 1.2. HERE**

Therefore, we can argue that as a world traveller he is neither a tourist nor a backpacker, but an explorer. This is seen, for example, in the systematic method of depicting the places visited. From his blog, it can be said that Lebedev employs a certain folklorist outsider's eye when recording and representing his travel experience by systematically revealing the overview (be it a landscape or a street view) in the light of a number of small and often banal details. Through his representation, exotic, faraway countries visited by him can be seen merely as bits and parts of the whole globe – the bigger picture. Distorting idealised images through uncanny details can also be called the *leitmotif* of Lebedev's travel blog. It originates in his visit to Trotsky's house in Mexico at the beginning of the 1990s, as Lebedev writes in the very first entry: "Then a very important thing happened, which has had an influence on all my remaining life. At the Trotsky house museum, a water closet (*sortir*) caught my eyes. That moment I lost my interest in ordinary sights forever" (Meksika 1990).

This sudden occurrence of a banal everyday fact at a location where thousands of tourists come yearly to witness how the Russian revolutionary was killed with an ice pick, can be seen as an instantaneous demystification of a historical person or an event by the tourist gaze. This tiniest of details changed Lebedev's view of travelling altogether, and his blog systematically strives to demystify not only the places and sights he visits around the world but also the very processes of gazing into new places and representing travel. His traveller's gaze, his accumulating travel experience, and his version of the world map respectively turn into an expanding authorial artwork which he puts on display in his blog.

The representation of the travel experience as a means of the accumulation of a certain type of capital thus raises the question of appropriating and re-appropriating the world

socially, culturally, and aesthetically by a post-Soviet person through global mobility. But what exactly does it mean to be a post-Soviet person in this framework? Put differently, what does it mean to possess a Russian passport at the precise moments of crossing borders? A short look at Shanin's blog offers some answers to these questions.

Shanin's blog starts with the following elaboration of the Russian passport:

Already in the times of Mayakovsky who pulled his passport out of his 'wide trouser-pockets' and proclaimed 'read this and envy – I'm a citizen,' it was perceived with irony, even sarcasm. The majority of my compatriots viewed the Soviet, and later Russian, passport with disdain. Many rushed abroad with the single aim of getting a 'good' passport, with which one could travel without a visa. Even today, many people think that it is very hard to travel with the Russian passport (*Ideia proekta*).<sup>12</sup>

Shanin wants to liberate his readers from this perception and simultaneously introduce an alternative view of the world, i.e., the visa-free world. This worldview would free the traveller from having to visit embassies and consulates, and from filling in forms and paying fees. Travelling without a visa thus saves both time and money. Consequently, the description of how the travellers cross borders becomes a significant element of the whole blog as stories connected to border formalities, and the behaviour of the officials are a recurrent theme in the blog, in addition to detailed information on stamps, vouchers, and rules concerning transit visas. This gives the reader interesting information and emphasises the role of the blog as a storage of information which can be used to navigate the visa-free world in practice.

In addition, the project aims at the visual appropriation of the visa-free world. For instance, in the first photograph taken at the airport in Moscow just before departure, the group is wearing the typical budget travellers' gear: heavy backpacks, thigh pocket trousers, and camera bags. The gear changes slightly once they have left the home country as in all photos taken in different foreign countries visited, the travellers wear a bright orange t-shirt with an image of a tiny hiker carrying the globe on his back, which is the project's logo. These t-shirts function as an effective visual element that repeats throughout the blog. They mark the route across the visa-free world and, figuratively speaking, they draw a new map of the world discovered by Shanin and his co-travellers. Consequently, if Lebedev's version of the world map, "Tema was here," is an individualistic and elitist image of the globe only accessible to those few who have enough skills and resources, the world map re-drawn by the project *Mir bez viz* is rather a democratised, collectively re-appropriated version of the world by an average post-Soviet person. Moreover, if Lebedev aims to take over the whole world by visiting as many countries as possible and viewing all the places he visits with a gaze that he has reconstructed and defined by himself, then the members of *Mir bez viz* collective aim to mark the world with their orange t-shirts and ultimately rebuild a new concept of the visa-free world.

Figure 4. The travellers of the project *Mir bez viz* photographed against a tourist view as wearing their orange team t-shirts – a repetitive visual element in the blog. Courtesy of Valeri Shanin.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of Russian travel blogs I have demonstrated that digital publication formats create novel tools for lifestyle media and their representation of identity work. I have argued that popular travel blogs negotiate different viewpoints of the geopolitics of Self as they reflect the life situation and social status of an individual against the ideals of free global mobility and personal ability to cross borders between countries and cultures. For the Russian online audience, the blogs also introduce an arena for virtual tourism – a window to the different practices of travel culture and global community of travellers. The bloggers' ideals of free mobility are conveyed to the online readership through the geopolitically active gaze, which projects different imaginations and interpretations of individual Russians as global actors against the backdrop of travel culture. One of the key findings of this chapter is that digital publication format helps to preserve and accumulate the immaterial social and cultural values embedded in the travel experience. Moreover, it emphasizes the individual's possibility to acquire and produce means not only for extensive geographical mobility but also for economic flexibility beyond the traditional job market regulated by the state as, for instance, the example of Dubrovskaja and her conception traveliving as the ruling ideology of mobility and lifestyle demonstrates.

In the blogs scrutinized in this chapter, popular geopolitical imaginations are also created through a certain type of creative and/or conceptual approach to world travel, as the examples of Lebedev and Shanin show. Both blogs represent travel as a continuous and goal-oriented project in the process of which the traveller's gaze expands, gradually reinventing the whole globe in a way that it becomes a newly organized terrain of mobility liberated from state institutions, as exemplified by Shanin, or even a private possession, as shown by Lebedev. As the result, a new version of the world map is being digitally visualised in the blog. These maps are based on the way of thinking that emphasises personal choice and

freedom over state control and thus they strive to give an alternative to the social and political reality image of the power relations between the state and individual citizen.

The travel blogs portray free global mobility first and foremost as the freedom to put on one's travel gear at any times and thereby become part of a global lifestyle. The popular geopolitical image of the world is tackled on the highly individualised level and connected especially to the question of what kind of global agency is accessible to the post-Soviet individual in the globalised world of leisure and lifestyle industry rather than to the question of what kind of geopolitical power Russia as a country represents. In other words, the blogs do not comment on the cultural, political and economic relations that the countries of destinations have with Russia but the purpose of travel is to become a global Self and to make the whole world home. As the result, an idealised version of both the Self and globe is being created through different digital publication formats – the world outside the home country becomes a heterotopian space of self-reflection and seeing differently.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Vlad Strukov, Laura Lyytikäinen and Inna Perheentupa and Cai Weaver for their insightful comments on the previous versions of this chapter. I also thank Emil Aaltonen Foundation for financial support.

<sup>2</sup> The lifestyle media consists of a number of different media formats from home decor magazines to shopping guides to makeover television shows to fashion and travel blogs.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to her popular blog, Dubrovskaja has become a minor internet celebrity and role model for other Russian backpackers and travel bloggers as she has been interviewed by a number of web publications and major Russian lifestyle magazines such as *Afisha* (O puti iz iakutskogo detstva...). Dubrovskaja and her partner Adzhei Verma also appear as the main heroes of the documentary film *Traveliving. Zhizn' v puteshestvii*, directed by Maksim Vasil'ev, available on YouTube (viewed more than 57 000 times, May, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> One of the most followed Russian LiveJournal bloggers and Russian IT pioneer (see Gusjenov 2014; Strukov 2014; Yagodin 2014) Artemi Lebedev is also a famous designer and entrepreneur. As the son of the writer Tatiana Tolstaia, also a popular blogger (see Rutten 2014, 2009), he has a background in the Russian literary intelligentsia.

<sup>5</sup> *Vokrug sveta*, was founded in 1861, is the longest-standing popular lifestyle magazine in Russia. *Mir bez viz* stands for an online travelers' community headed by Valeri Shanin. On top of several internet entries and YouTube video clips he has produced a full-length feature film and a book.

<sup>6</sup> In addition, the travelers come from different socio-economic backgrounds: Dubrovskaja and Shanin are frugal backpackers, whereas Lebedev belongs to the cosmopolitan elite for whom the travel budget is never an issue. Shanin travels with a group of people who have signed up to the world tour through his website and Dubrovskaja travels together with her life companion whom she met through the travelers' online community.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2013 more than 18 million tourist trips abroad were made by Russians, which was a nineteen per cent increase on the previous year. Their most popular destinations were Turkey, Egypt, Greece, China, Thailand, Spain, and Finland, respectively (Russian Tourist Association 2014).

<sup>8</sup> On the post-Soviet consumer revolution, see Gurova 2015. On consumer revolutions as setting up the theoretical and methodological framework for the study of modernity, see Appadurai 1996, 72–73.

<sup>9</sup> The term is a modification of the term “global Russian,” which is often connected to the new media project *Snob* launched in 2008. In addition to *Snob*'s flagship publication – the luxurious glossy magazine with literary content – the project maintains an online news portal and provides social networking tools for registered, paying customers. *Snob* was established by the businessman and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, and it strives to create a community of global Russian around its print and online publications. The global Russian, as defined by the producers of *Snob*, stands for an affluent, Russian speaking, metropolitan, and highly educated “citizen of the world” (Nikolaevich 2011). Therefore, the use of the term in this particular context is, at least to some extent, an attempt to re-conceptualize the Russian economic elite, the *nouveau riche*, by attaching some high cultural values to it. The initial idea of the publication was not only to produce quality reading matter for international, affluent, and liberal minded Russians, but also to form a new identity category, and to create a virtual meeting place for them (see Roesen 2010). However, the global Russian remains an imaginary category combining the ideals of Russian intelligentsia and emigrant culture.

<sup>10</sup> Especially when seen from the cyber optimistic, or hacker culture's point of view. See Thomas 2003; Castells 2001.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of people living in popular tourist spots, see Sherlock 2001.

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<sup>12</sup> Quotes from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "My Soviet Passport," translated into English by Herbert Marshall (Mayakovsky 1929).